

The Wildfowl Trust at Slimbridge in Britain

BY

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(*With two plates*)

During July, August, and September 1960 I was fortunate enough to be able to spend a number of very pleasant and instructive days at the Wildfowl Trust at Slimbridge in the beautiful county of Gloucestershire in Britain. I have written this note in the belief that members of the Society and other readers of the *Journal* may like to know more about this extremely interesting place.

The Trust is situated on the flats of the southern shore of the broad Severn Estuary, 13 miles south-west of the city of Gloucester and very near the village of Slimbridge. Only a few miles to the east are the picturesque Cotswold Hills. On the Severn flats several thousand wild geese and ducks come every winter to feed, the main feeding grounds being just adjacent to the Trust itself, and members of the Trust have special facilities for viewing these wild birds at close quarters from hides near by. These wild geese are mostly White-fronted Geese from Russia, though all thirteen kinds of British geese have been recorded there.

Several hundred wild Mallard live and breed in the grounds of the Trust at Slimbridge, and during the winter many other wild duck such as Pintail, Shoveller, Teal, and Wigeon come into the pens of their own accord. There may be a thousand or more of these wild ducks in the Trust during the winter months, and they are very willing guests, and welcome ones too.

From the above, it may be assumed that the winter is the best time to see Slimbridge, especially as most of the drakes are in their best plumage (breeding plumage) at that time of the year. This is true—if you can pick a mild day with sunshine in the English winter! For obvious reasons, by far the greater number of visitors (including the writer himself) go to Slimbridge in the summer, the peak times of the largest numbers of visitors being the Whitsun weekend, and the holiday months of July, August, and September. The countryside is very nice during these summer months, but some of the wildfowl,

especially the drakes, are moulting and are in their 'eclipse' plumage. For instance the Redcrested Pochard drake appeared to be neither red nor crested in July and August, and only towards the end of September began to look the handsome creature that it is.

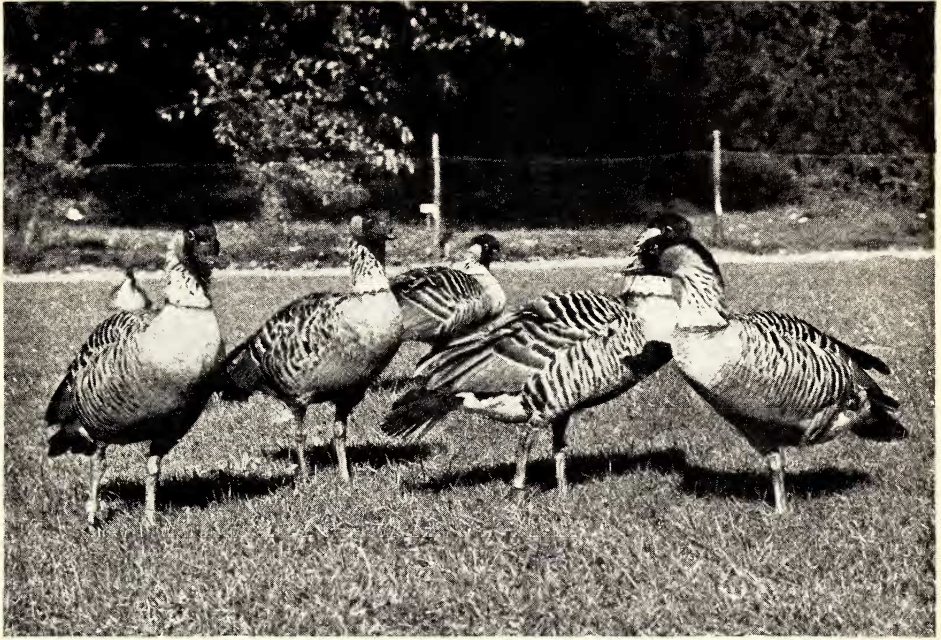
There is a branch of the Trust at Peakirk, near Peterborough in Northamptonshire, known as the Peakirk Waterfowl Gardens, opened to the public in 1957. Both at Slimbridge and at Peakirk are maintained and operated two of the last Duck Decoys in England: these are Berkeley New Decoy at Slimbridge, and Borough Fen near Peakirk. In these hundreds of wild ducks are caught, ringed, and released every year.

The Wildfowl Trust at Slimbridge was started in 1946, and is now the largest and most varied collection of swans, geese, and ducks in the world. There are some 1500 birds here, of 160 different species and races; and most of them are so tame that they will readily feed out of your hand. There is no notice displayed telling you to 'keep off the grass', but there is one politely asking you to 'be careful not to step on the birds'.

Most of the birds are pinioned, to prevent them flying away—mainly for their own safety, as they might get killed if they strayed from the grounds. But many are 'full-winged', and fly from pen to pen but seldom (if ever) leave. In particular, I noticed that a large number of Snow Geese (from Greenland and North America) were full-winged and yet were so tame that they were nearly always getting fed by visitors. There were also a few Barheaded Geese (central Asia and northern India, Pakistan, and Burma) that were flying about full-winged. Of these, a Barheaded had paired off with a Snow Goose, and this mixed pair together with a pair of Barheaded Geese were always together, in some part of the grounds or another.

Such 'mixed marriages' are not encouraged by the Trust, but are not always easy to prevent—as is evidenced by the large number of hybrids in the Hybrid Pen, where the results of strange crossings present a serious challenge to the experts when it comes to trying to identify them!

Probably the greatest triumph of wildfowl conservation at Slimbridge, and to a smaller extent at Peakirk, is the case of the Ne-ne or Hawaiian Goose, the rarest of all the world's geese. In 1947 there were only about 50 of these birds left in the whole world. The Trust brought three birds from Hawaii in 1950 and 1951, and these three had increased to no less than 126 in 1960, which was about half the total world population of this goose. It is hoped



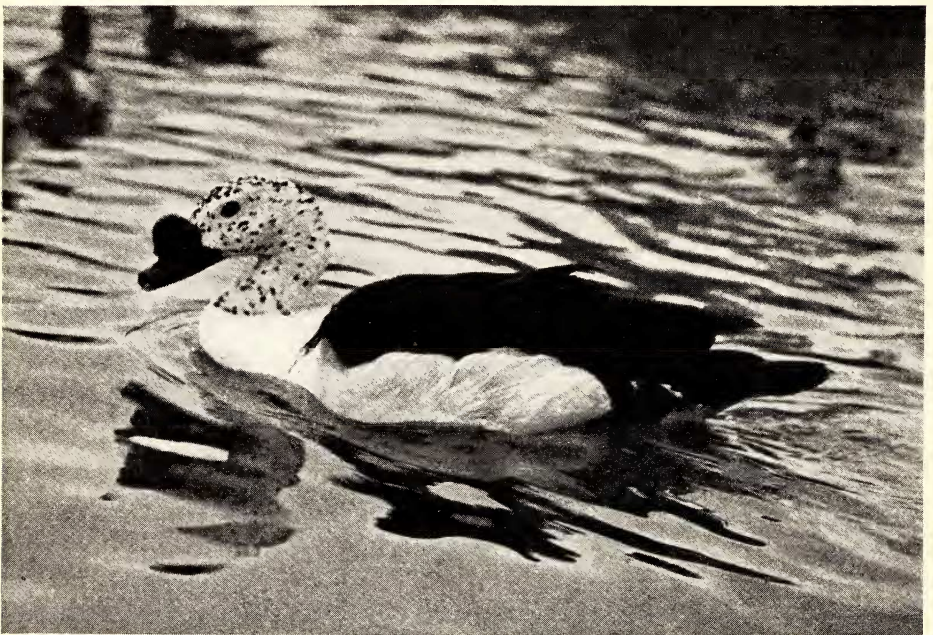
Hawaiian Geese or Ne-nes, one of the most important exhibits at the Wildfowl Trust



Part of the grounds of the Wildfowl Trust, as seen from the Acrow Tower



Whitewinged Wood Duck (drake) in Rushy Pen



Comb Duck or Nukta (drake) in Rushy Pen

Photos : E. P. Gee